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ABSTRACT

Public education in British Columbia has been profoundly affected by replacement of Ministry-appointed superintendents with those locally employed and by eligibility of applicants other than former superintendents for the positions of deputy minister and assistant deputy minister. The single greatest influence in increasing awareness of educational evaluation in British Columbia is the "B.C. Assessment Program." Assessment projects encompass most academic areas as well as a physical education and a kindergarten needs assessment. The Learning Assessment Branch is also associated with development of achievement tests geared toward curriculum goals. By 1978, districts were expected to conduct, implement, and evaluate their own assessment programs, but in 1983 the Fiscal Framework System restricted fund staffing, and materials required for programs. A September 1985 conference, "Evaluation for Excellence in Education," discussed evaluation issues, including the popularization of excellence, evaluation, and effective schooling; the influence of American educational problems on Canadians; and misconceptions regarding school effectiveness, teacher effectiveness, and research. Production of test item banks, continuation of student assessment, and collaboration of universities with school districts on research are several suggestions for future concentration. (RG)

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Issues and Opportunities in Bridging the Current Gaps between Educators and Researchers: A School District Perspective

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Presentation to the Symposium: ALTERED ROLES FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH: AN EXAMINATION OF CHANGING PATTERNS FOR THE DELIVERY OF SERVICE IN THE FIELD

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Issues and Opportunities in Bridging the Current
Gaps Between Educators and Researchers:
A School District Perspective

British Columbia is currently undergoing political changes that will have a profound effect on all aspects of education. It would be futile at present to speculate on the impact these changes will have on the nature and scope of educational evaluation in the province. The purpose of this paper, however, is to discuss some issues regarding evaluation from a district perspective. First, in order to provide some background on the current situation, a brief history will be provided of the events that have mainly inluenced how evaluation is viewed in B.C. schools. The second part of the paper will look at some issues regarding evaluation that are of concern not only in British Columbia but elsewhere in Canada. The paper will conclude by offering some suggestions regarding future directions.

History of evaluation in B.C. schools

In the mid-seventies two events occurred which greatly altered public education in B.C. One was the beginning of local employment for school superintendents. At first only the larger school districts were permitted to advertize for, select, and appoint a new superintendent. Gradually the team

of District Superintendents appointed by the Ministry and assigned to districts by the Ministry was replaced by locally employed superintendents.

Carlin (1986) lists some effects this decision had including the fact that the new superintendents could set up their own support staff at the district level.

Within the Ministry another important change was made. The positions of deputy-minister and assistant deputy ministers, previously filled by former district superintendents were now open to other appointments. In turn, this led to a new conception of the Ministry's role and functions, to the creation of new departments within the Ministry and tothe addition of new staff. In particular, the Learning Assessment Branch was formed consisting of a Director on permanent staff and two consultants seconded from their school districts. Later 2 assistant directors were appointed and they, as well as the director, were measurement specialists.

Mussio and Greer (1980)describe the start of the B.C. Assessment Program:

> Following the termination of provincial exams in 1973, the British Columbia Ministry of Education, Science and Technology formed a Joint Committee of Evaluation to advise on the development of a long-range assessment plan for the province. The committee, consisting of teachers, school trustees, superintendents, university personnel, and ministry staff, met for a period of about two years. The rationale developed by this committee has formed the basis of the B.C. Assessment Program. . . . The fundamental purpose of the

assessment is to provide information as to what and how students are learning on a province-side basis (p.26).

There is no doubt that the B.C. Assessment Program has been the single greatest influence in increasing awareness of educational evaluation in the province. Following the initial pilot project in 1976 (Language B.C.) there have been assessments of Reading (1977, 1980, 1984); Mathematics (1977, 1981, 1985); Science (1978, 1982, 1986); Social Studies (1977); Physical Education (1979); and a Needs Assessment for Kindergarten (1980). The Contract Team which guides each assessment is required to include at least one practicing teacher. The Ministry compiles lists of suitable resource persons from all parts of the province including teachers, principals, district staff, university personnel, trustees and parents. Prior to the assessment all test items are subject to review by representatives of these groups. Following the assessment provincial interpretation panels are formed to set performance standards based on the assessment results and to make recommendations to the Ministry.

The interpretation process also takes place at the district level using district results. After each assessment the Ministry provides districts with guidelines for carrying out the process and all the necessary materials. Again the interpretation panels consist of representative groups of teachers and principals and, if possible, trustees and parents. The panelists set performance standards for the district and make recommendations based on the district results. A report is prepared by district staff, submitted to the Board of School Trustees for approval, and filed with the Ministry of Education.

In addition to its work in regard to province-wide assessments, the Learning Assessment Branch also embarked on the development of classroom achievement tests. The plan was to provide teachers with test materials they could use voluntarily with their own classes. Each test would be keyed to the curriculum objectives of a course (say, Algebra 11) and would be provincially normed. Again, the process of developing these tests would involve classroom teachers: to identify major domains and objectives to be tested, to develop and review items, to assist in piloting items, administering the tests, and in establishing performance standards and cut-scores. A number of classroom achievement tests for senior grades and strand tests for elementary and junior grades were developed in mathematics, science, writing, and reading . These tests are still available to teachers at no cost to the district.

In 1978 the Ministry announced that all districts in B.C. would be required to have their own assessment policies. The Learning Assessment Branch was directed to seek out a few districts which expressed an interest in assessment and which already had someone on staff with some expertise in that area. Four districts were chosen to participate in a pilot project which led to the publication of the Ministry's Policy Guidelines on District Assessment Practices. By September 1980 all districts in B.C. were required to have their assessment policies in place and ready for implementation. The idea was that each district would develop and conduct its own district assessment program in key curriculum areas. Thus the matter of responsibility for the strengths and weaknesses of the programs in the public school system was to be shared by the Ministry for the province as a

whole and by the Districts for the performance of students within their own jurisdictions.

With the establishment of district assessment programs came the need to assign the responsibility for administering the program to someone at the district level. At first the larger districts were able to increase their central office staffs to handle the additional work by appointing a person with a background in measurement supported by subject area advisors. Work began on locally developed assessment materials involving teachers and principals. Outside agencies such as the Educational Research Institute of B.C. or B.C. Research were contracted to provide technical services similar to those provided for the Ministry. In turn, this led to expansion of the staffs and facilities of these agencies. The Learning Assessment Branch acted as a clearing house for information on locally developed assessment materials publishing a catalogue which it updated annually.

It looked as though the stage was set for continued interest in, support for, and increasing understanding of the nature and scope of educational evaluation. The Learning Assessment Branch as well as the technical agencies sponsored workshops on test development, there was talk of item banking, and ERIBC hosted resident scholars like Ross Traub and Ron Hambleton who also visited districts. Parallel to the work of the LAB but distinct from it were two other Ministry- initiated projects. Elementary School Assessment was introduced modelled on the secondary School Accreditation program which had been established in the early 1970's round about the time when the Ministry discontinued provincial exams for graduating students. Although secondary accreditation continued to be a

Ministry requirement, school assessment became a local responsibility, each Board being required to have its own assessment policy. Thus there was provision for flexibility in adapting the school assessment process to local situations.

The other Ministry-initiated project was program implementation. Again a separate branch was created to direct the work done in the field. Following Language B.C. there had been an extensive revision of the elementary language arts program, the first revision in over 30 years. Much of the early work of the Program Implementation Branch was directed towards orientation of teachers to the new Language Arts programs and texts, but there were also plans for districts to conduct their own evaluations of program implementation. A week-long workshop was held for district representatives in the summer of 1981 and the topic was program evaluation. Again, the general idea was that districts would initiate their own program evaluations contracting to outside agencies including university personnel for the necessary expertise and objectivity.

Two years later the situation was radically changed. A series of events began in the summer of 1983 which were to alter the direction of public education in B.C. and whose effects are still being felt. The Government introduced its Fiscal Framework System which particularly affected the Ministry of Education itself and the school districts.

This restraint program was intended to control district funding of education by ensuring that all districts across the province, regardless of size, would receive proportionately equal funding. A rigid series of

formulae were designed to calculate each district's funds. In effect, what happened was that most districts found that the funds generated by the formulae fell far short of their historic budgets. A very few districts actually received more funds under the FFS than they had previously re ceived. For most districts, however, FFS meant very drastic cuts in staffing. In order to protect the pupil/teacher ratio these cuts were made as far as possible from the classroom level.

Within the Ministry cuts were also felt, particularly in the area of clerical support staff, and many reassignments were also made among the educational staff. A major change occurred at the Learning Assessment Branch when the planned assessment and test development activity was put on hold . The emphasis shifted to the examinations section of the Branch which now was fully occupied in preparing all the arrangements necessary for the reintroduction of province-wide Grade 12 exams in 9 subject areas. The announcement was made in September 1983 and the exams had to be ready in time for the end of the first semester -- January 1984. Sometime during this period program implementation ceased to be a separate branch and some of the personnel were reassigned to Field Services. Secondary Accreditation was also put on hold for a time. Two years later the Ministry withdrew their share of the funding for ERIBC and the Board of Directors decided unanimously to voluntarily dissolve the Institute.

The withdrawal of so much Ministry and District support in terms of staff and materials seriously impaired the progress of some districts towards meaningful growth in the area of evaluation. The Learning Assessment Branch became less visible in the field since there were no

longer opportunities for the staff to provide the kinds of inservice that had been anticipated when the Branch was first formed. Nor were there opportunities for them to continue developing materials such as classroom achievement tests as a service to teachers. It is hoped with some easement of restraint that this situation can be reversed.

Issues regarding evaluation

This paper has dealt in some detail with events in B.C. that specifically affected assessment and other programs related to evaluation in order to give the provincial background before turning to some issues which are of concern in B.C. and in other parts of the country. All the provinces at some time or other in the last few years have undergone some form of restraint and thus have had to curtail or postpone whatever plans they may have had in the area of educational evaluation. Meanwhile other forces were at work which influenced how people think about education and how some educational dollars are spent.

In September 1985 a national conference was held in Quebec city sponsored by the Canadian Education Association's Advisory Committee on Educational Research. The conference was called "Evaluation for Excellence in Education" and its purpose was to put student evaluation issues into a wider context for a diverse group of delegates drawn from all sections of the education community. The plenary addresses and some of the other papers have been edited and published (Evaluation for Excellence in Education). It is interesting to note the variety of issues identified by the conference speakers. Frequently concern about misunderstanding, misconceptions and

misuse of existing information was mentioned, even more than concern about progress towards new knowledge.

Several of the papers in Evaluation for Excellence in Education discuss concerns arising out of the recent popularization of the terms *excellence* and *evaluation* which along with *effective schooling* appear as frequent topics in magazines and journals subscribed to by school and district administrators. Desjarlais (1986) says: "We are now in the thick of an effective school movement with its rhetoric of reform and its scarcely veiled insistence on quantitative achievement standards" (p.29). Noting some of the major differences between the U.S. and the Canadian school systems he fears that we in Canada sometimes adopt American educational problems and their solutions. Levin (1986) is also concerned about the bandwagon effect:

> I would not want to see us rush pell-mell into evaluation as the new answer to our problems only to discover, as we have with so many other approaches in the past, that it was not doing everything we had hoped, and then to abandon it as useless. There is a contribution that evaluation can make. But it is limited and is most likely to take place if we understand not only the contribution but those elements that will act to limit that contribution (p.42).

Gillis (1986) surveyed a number of school districts and found that there are widespread misconceptions across the country on the part of district staffs particularly in regard to school effectiveness and teacher effectiveness. First of all, there seems to be a misunderstanding about what constitutes research. She gives a number of examples of how well-meaning

people have rushed off to embrace this or that instructional model believing it to be grounded in research when, in fact, a search of the literature fails to turn up any evidence that it is.

A year later CEA and the Association of B.C Superintendents of Schools sponsored the first of a series of regional conferences. It was held in Vancouver in October 1986 and officials, teachers and trustees were invited to attend. In his address to the delegates Rod Wickstrom noted the wide gaps that are evident between knowledge and practice and the kinds of confusion that arise from lack of understanding of the nature and use of the various levels of evaluation. He categorizes evaluation activities along a continuum of levels of sophistication: 1) basic research; 2) program evaluation; 3) student learning assessment; 4) process reviews (such as classroom observation and school accreditation reviews). To these he adds another category -- informal opinion -- which, he says, is the least sophisticated category of evaluation yet it is often the one that most influences decisions about education.

Future directions

Excellent suggestions for future directions can be found in the papers in Evaluation for Excellence in Education and in the last chapter of The Craft of Evaluation in Canada (Maclean, 1985). This paper will conclude by selecting a few of these which have particular application in B.C.

1. The production of test item banks at the elementary and secondary levels. The Student Assessment Branch of the Ministry is currently studying the feasibility of producing test items in

cooperation with the school districts in B.C. Teachers would be involved in item generation, review, and field testing. If this proposal goes ahead it would mean that the type of work that had to be put on hold at the time of restraint could resume and that the Ministry's student assessment staff could undertake a leadership role in inservicing teachers in test development. With most schools already having computers, this would encourage more teachers to become familiar with using the new technology and applying the knowledge to developing better test items for their own classroom use.

2. Continuation of province-wide student assessment. The Ministry's schedule calls for a series of assessments to be conducted over the next few years including reading, writing, mathematics, social studies, science and French. Again, teachers will be involved at the various stages of the assessment process. Since 1984, the Ministry has been able to produce school level as well as district level results and this has encouraged discussion and interpretation of results among school staffs. The process has several instructional benefits: it forces teachers to examine the curriculum critically; it helps them to realise the pitfalls in writing appropriate test items; and it challenges them to reassess their own standards in judging student performance.

3. Collaboration on research projects between universities and school districts.

Much of the confusion about what research is and how research findings should be used arises from the fact that few people have actually been engaged in a research project. Many master's programs, for example, require only a major paper. As a result many people in

education, eager to find quick solutions, may be unable to distinguish between results that are based on sound studies and results that are based on informal surveys and observations.

How many of these projects will be carried out remains to be seen. At present much depends on the kinds of relationships that can be maintained among the various groups within the educational community in B.C.

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